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Saints and slackers: challenging discourses about the decline of domestic cooking

Abstract

Amidst growing concern about both nutrition and food safety, anxiety about a loss of everyday cooking skills is a common part of public discourse. Within both the media and academia, it is widely perceived that there has been an erosion of the skills held by previous generations with the development of convenience foods and kitchen technologies cited as culpable in 'deskilling' current and future generations. These discourses are paralleled in policy concerns, where the incidence of indigenous food-borne disease in the UK has led to the emergence of an understanding of consumer behaviour, within the food industry and among food scientists, based on assumptions about consumer 'ignorance' and poor food hygiene knowledge and cooking skills. These assumptions are accompanied by perceptions of a loss of 'common-sense' understandings about the spoilage and storage characteristics of food, supposedly characteristic of earlier generations. The complexity of cooking skills immediately invites closer attention to discourses of their assumed decline. This paper draws upon early findings from a current qualitative research project which focuses on patterns of continuity and change in families' domestic kitchen practices across three generations. Drawing mainly upon two family case studies, the data presented problematise assumptions that earlier generations were paragons of virtue in the context of both food hygiene and cooking. In taking a broader, life-course perspective, we highlight the absence of linearity in participants' engagement with cooking as they move between different transitional points throughout the life-course.

Keywords: food, family, kitchen practices, cooking skills, deskilling, inter-generational transfer, life-course perspective

Saint and slackers: challenging discourses about the decline of domestic cooking

The 'demise' of cooking

Amidst growing concerns about nutrition and food safety, anxiety about the 'impoverished state of domestic cooking' has become a common part of public discourse (Short 2006). Whether reported in academia (Griffith and Wallace 1998), or the media (e.g. *The Daily Mail* 2010), or highlighted by an increasing number of celebrity chefs, a perception of the erosion of skills held by previous generations has emerged over the last 10-15 years. Suggested contributing factors include the breakdown of traditional domestic divisions of labour associated with increased labour market participation by women, the wider availability of 'convenience' foods, and the effects of technologies, culpable in both deskilling cooking in the kitchen, and distracting children from being *in* the kitchen to absorb tacit cooking skills. For Steinberg (1998), the loss of culinary traditions and skills, generally assumed to pass via a hierarchy of gerontocratic authority, is a necessary part of becoming 'modern'.

Academic discourses of decline and deskilling find their parallels in policy concerns. Indeed, these contributed to the *social inclusion* discourses which were to form the basis for social and public health policies of the Labour government in the UK in the late 1990s. During this period there was a proliferation of community-based interventions aimed at reaching the most marginalised groups in society with advice concerning health, exercise, diet and nutrition, with many professionals taking the view that possession of cooking skills and knowledge can improve diet (Short 2006). However, the emerging perception of cooking as a recreational lifestyle choice over the same period, along with the concomitant rise in popularity of cookery programmes, cookbooks and merchandising of an array of specialist cooking paraphernalia problematises discourses of deskilling and lack of interest, suggesting that it is within *particular* constituencies that this is assumed to be the case. Indeed, Hollows and Jones (2010), writing on the shifting image of Jamie Oliver from lifestyle expert to moral entrepreneur, via *Jamie's School Dinners* and *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, highlight how the latter, in particular, works within a wider discourse of 'class pathologization' (2010: 308), appealing to populist discourses within which it is assumed that it is socially and economically excluded populations who are unable to cook. This pathologisation of certain social groups is not, however, a recent phenomenon. Concerns about the dearth of cooking skills among the 'lower' classes can be traced back at least 200 years, when calls were first made for the poor to be educated in the basics of cooking (Lang, Barling and Caraher 2009).

In a related domain, poor cooking and food hygiene knowledge have also been implicated in increased concerns regarding the incidence of indigenous food-borne disease in the UK. Improved safeguards in the production/supply chain, food safety legislation and the creation of the Food Standards Agency are cited as having improved food safety. However, continuing high levels of foodborne illness and the dearth of knowledge regarding what happens to food beyond the point of purchase have led to the emergence of a particular understanding of consumer behaviour within the food industry and among food scientists. This understanding is based on assumptions about consumer 'ignorance' and poor food hygiene knowledge and cooking skills. These assumptions are often accompanied by perceptions of a loss of 'common-sense' understandings about the spoilage and storage characteristics of food, supposedly characteristic of earlier generations (Shaw 1999). Jackson et al's (2010) study of consumer anxieties regarding chicken production highlights that, among producers, there may exist a culture of 'blame' through which discourses of deskilling in relation to food safety have been invoked. Consumers have been characterised as lacking in rudimentary cooking skills, and as associating cooking with the assembly of several pre-cooked components from cartons, packets and tins (Blythman 1999: 215). Similarly they are understood to be increasingly distanced from primary foodstuffs in their raw state because of the mediating role of the retail industry and because most consumers have little direct contact with agriculture (Jackson et al. 2010: 182).

Also contributing to a narrative of deskilling is the impact of innovations. These range from food supply systems to the technologies of the kitchen which have undeniably operated to reduce demands for certain sorts of skills on behalf of the people doing the cooking. The effects of technological developments on the competencies, skills, meanings and practices of food provisioning have been explored over recent decades, including around fridges (Miller 1991; Isenstadt 1998), cookers (Silva 2000), freezers (Shove and Southerton 2000) and microwaves (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993) which have 'transformed the interior landscape' of the domestic kitchen (Giard 1998: 210). The articulation of the culpability of technologies within a narrative of de-skilling is made clearly by Giard, who suggests that electro-mechanisation has transformed the cook into an 'unskilled spectator who watches the machine function in her place' (1998: 212). The emancipatory promise carried by new technologies and convenience, to free-up time for typically female cooks has been thoroughly problematised since Cowan (1983) identified the 'ironies of household technology'.

Increasingly, technological developments are more likely to be associated with discourses of decline which threaten health, family relationships and cultural identities (Short 2006).

These various discourses implicitly recognise cooking skills as complex, their effective acquisition requiring childhood immersion in the complex of values, routines and skills of a 'traditional' family kitchen, close to the apron strings of mother. However, the complexity of cooking skills and the range of innovations now available which contribute to the processes of meal preparation immediately invite closer attention to claims made through discourses of decline. Indeed, both Murcott (1983) and Short (2006) have questioned what, exactly, is implied by the verb 'to cook' and, importantly, who is it that does it? Female participants reported by both Murcott (1983) and Charles and Kerr (1988) indicate that while they recognise that men are involved in food preparation, their culinary creations are more likely to be characterised by these women as 'snacks', as opposed to 'proper' meals.

Consequently, we might ask: what constitutes 'cooking'? For example, does it require the application of heat to fresh, raw ingredients prepared from 'scratch'? (Short 2006: 7). Or is it simply any process that involves some level of transformation of foodstuffs, such as the preparation of a sandwich, beans on toast, or heating up a ready meal in the microwave? Indeed, Short highlights the apparent failure - among those lamenting the deskilling of cooking - to unpack the meaning of phrases such as 'cooking ability', 'culinary knowledge', 'traditional cooking skills' and 'assembly skills' (2006: 7). And, as Silva (2000) points out, the introduction of innovations such as ovens has not eliminated complex assessments and judgments required on the part of the 'cook'. Knowing when a cake or joint of meat is done does not hinge on manual abilities but, as Short observes, on cognitive, perceptual skills that prompt the appropriate action (2006: 8).

A further consideration is that advice on how to cook meat, in particular, does not remain static and consumers are presented with different, and often contradictory, sources of information. The packaging in which a chicken is wrapped will tell us to cook the bird for x-number of minutes per kilogramme and y-number of additional minutes thereafter; the advice given by Mrs Beeton's cookbook might differ to that suggested by Delia Smith or Jamie Oliver; our mother's or grandmother's injunction might have been to cook it until the juices run clear; while food safety experts now inform us that the only way to safely check meat for doneness is by testing the internal temperature with a meat probe. Thus, while food scientists

and producers may bemoan lost understandings of the storage and spoilage characteristics of food and knowledge about how to cook safely and thoroughly, knowledge understood as previously having been '*passed down from generation to generation*' (Shaw 1999, 10.1), there is little acknowledgement that the everyday act of preparing a meal is now fraught with an awareness of microbiological concerns which our grandmothers may not have faced. Cooking has certainly been simplified and de-skilled in significant respects, through the availability of 'convenience' foods and innovations which speed up the process. Simultaneously it has also become more complex in terms of the volume of information available about how to cook safely, healthily, tastily, on a budget, for a family, for guests, for oneself, *and* in terms of the range of knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate contemporary technologies of food provisioning, from use-by dates to microwave de-frost programmes.

An implicit assumption embedded within discourses of decline in relation to cooking knowledge and skill is that, at some point in the past, our mothers and grandmothers *did* know how to cook, and that they had acquired their knowledge, via embodied experience and a form of cooking apprenticeship (Sutton 2006: 97), through observation and an engagement in the kitchens of their own childhoods. These scripts of the past clearly reflect a valorisation of 'traditional' cooking practices associated with a golden era of cooking, during which the 'family meal' (reportedly now also in decline [Murcott 1997]) was the cornerstone of family life. But *when* was this era, and for whom was it a reality? Shapiro (2009), reporting on the US at the turn of the twentieth century, documents the emergence of the domestic science movement, which saw 'traditional' approaches to cooking displaced by science and technology, the latter having gained 'the aura of divinity' (2009: 4). Indeed, exponents of this approach specifically eschewed 'tradition', including the intra-familial, inter-generational transfer of cooking knowledge: '(a)s they saw it, domestic science would recast women's lives in terms of the future and haul the sentimental, ignorant ways of mother's kitchen into the scientific age' (Shapiro 2009: 9). It would seem that – in the US at least - early twentieth century modernity brought to cooking practices a rejection of those tacit understandings of food and taste invoked in the discourses previously described of the *current* era, in favour of something more precise, more reliant on instruction and guidance, and less judgement from the individual, or based on experience. Shapiro suggests that, by the 1950s, domestic science had not only brought with it culinary regimentation, but also intellectual and imaginative

collapse, the model housewife now being little more than a clinical and efficient assembler of processed foods, selected on the basis of optimal nutrition, digestion and hygiene.

Also implicit within discussions regarding the intergenerational transfer of cooking skills is the assumption that knowledge is passed between *women*: grandmother, mother, daughter, reminding us that responsibility for family feeding continues to lie firmly with women (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991). Indeed, with the exception of Adler (1983) who discusses cooking practices passed from father to son, and Swinbank (2002), in her analyses of the influence of mothers' domestic cooking on the culinary practices of haute cuisine chefs, grandfathers, fathers and sons remain largely invisible in the literature.

These arguments highlight the need to problematise claims regarding a historically recent 'death' of traditional cooking skills. Such narratives rest upon a simplistic framing of the complex processes, knowledges and skills involved in accomplishing the provision of a meal in any historical situation, and contestable assumptions about the dynamics of generational transfer of those attributes. Clearly, there are grounds for empirical interrogation.

Methods

This article draws upon early findings from a current qualitative research project¹ which focuses on patterns of continuity and change in families' domestic kitchen practices over the last 100 years, exploring domestic food provisioning practices in context as people interact with food and other objects, both at the points of purchase, storage, preparation, consumption and disposal. The project draws on current theories of practice to explore the ways in which differing – and often competing – discourses and sources of knowledge regarding cooking and food safety practice have been negotiated into everyday routines. It investigates, also, the role of a variety of innovations - ranging from 'use-by' dates and anti-bacterial sprays, to fridges, freezers and cookers - in transforming everyday kitchen practices which, according to some viewpoints, have 'deskilled' consumers. The study aims to make visible both memories of cooking, as well as the meanings behind individuals' actual practices as they interact with food, and other objects, both in the shop and in their own kitchens. From pursuit of this aim,

¹ The project is part of an international programme of research on 'Consumer Culture in an Age of Anxiety' (CONANX) funded by an Advanced Investigator Grant awarded to Peter Jackson by the European Research Council (ERC-2008-AdG-230287-CONANX). The project has been approved by a University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

findings emerge which are pertinent to questions arising from the problematisation of discourses of decline in skills.

In addition to a series of seven completed focus groups with people segmented by age and different household types, a household study is also being carried out. This combines food-focused life history interviews with ethnographic work, in the form of provisioning ‘go-alongs’ and videoed kitchen tours and meal preparation². Although recruitment is on-going, twenty participants from seven families have been interviewed to date. The objective of exploring patterns of continuity and change in families’ kitchen practices is being achieved by speaking with representatives of at least two generations from each family, one of which must be aged 55+. Fieldwork is based predominantly in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire. Families recruited to date largely reflect a highly motivated middle-class constituency, although social mobility within these families, particularly among the older generations, is significant. Recruitment has been facilitated largely via snowballing through inter-personal networks, but also through focus groups with existing community groups and leafleting in community centres. More marginalised population groups have proved harder to reach, and recruitment is now focussed on addressing this gap in the data. While the research is on-going at the time of writing, the data collected to date provide robust empirical grounds for the job of critical engagement undertaken in this article.

Informed consent was secured during every stage of the research process, and where photographic images have been used, this is with participants’ consent. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, each participant being assigned a pseudonym. Each author reviewed a selection of transcripts to ensure consistency in the interpretation of the data and a coding framework was subsequently developed which reflected an interactive engagement between the research questions and the data.

In what follows, we first draw briefly upon data from the focus groups, to begin to elucidate the dimensions of debate around ideas of intergenerational transfer and difference. This sets the scene for the main body of discussion, which draws largely on the data collected during the interviews, in which participants were asked to speak not only about their own practices, but also those of their partners, and members of other generations, including those who are

² Selected images from the kitchen tours can be accessed via the project’s online photo-gallery <http://www.flickr.com/photos/52548860@N08/>

now deceased. We focus on two extended families: the Andersons and the Faulkners. Both families were recruited from the first author's extended friendship networks. The Andersons were approached because, in both the older and younger generations, it is the men who are the everyday cooks. By contrast, Hannah Faulkner (35) is an acquaintance who had expressed interest in the research and had agreed to both approach other members of her family, as well as friends and colleagues in her place of work. We focus on these particular families here because they specifically contest claims regarding the 'saintliness' of women of earlier generations.

Just like mother?

A range of insights are emerging from the data collected thus far regarding the dynamics of inter-generational transmission of cooking values and practices. While focus group participants in particular have deployed generalising discourses of generational loss of skills, food-based life-history interviews, combined with observations, invariably reveal a more complex and nuanced picture at the individual level. Although small scale intensive qualitative work can neither prove nor disprove long term population level trends in cooking skills, it is this sort of research that is needed to begin to disentangle the diverse influences and relationships which converge in cooking practices as a basis for critically exploring the validity of claims about declining cooking skills.

Within those discourses purporting the decline of cooking, there is imagined some past halcyon period characterised by innate cooking skill against which narratives of erosion are framed. The same general discourse has also found expression in our research so far, particularly in focus group discussions where participants are typically more likely to speak in general terms, and about other people. For example, exploring issues of responsibility in relation to food safety, 85-year old Bert, who took part in a focus group with people aged 63-89 argued that:

"...all these ladies were taught food hygiene as girls this high... Today, young children do not go in the kitchen, they don't work with their mums, their mums don't know hygiene the same, so consequently, that is where it starts, with the housewife".

Bert's comment indicates the currency of ideas that people of an earlier generation possessed 'superior' knowledge and skills that have somehow been lost to subsequent generations, and

that they were paragons of virtue in the domain of food hygiene. However, his views were challenged by his own wife, who pointed out:

“I don’t think you can generalise like that Bert because you know, you’re making us out to be saints with food hygiene... and younger people not, and I don’t think that’s true, I think they’re equally as aware of food hygiene” (Nellie, 78).

Reinforcing Nellie’s point, focus group participants in their thirties highlight perceived limitations within their mothers’ practices. These include: *“chopping everything on the counter without a board”*, *“over-boil[ing] everything”*, microwave cooking, and a fascination with pre-packaged food – perceived as a demonstration of *“progressing and moving with the times”*.

The focus groups were a space in which the complexities that lie behind generalising assumptions of superior competence and of generational transfer were initially problematised. However, while the use of focus groups did a good job of opening up the complexities inherent to these processes, they could not lend themselves to the in-depth exploration of practices which can be bound up with intensely personal stories. The household study provided an opportunity to achieve a more nuanced understanding of how these issues may, or may not, be played out at the level of individual families. While there are certainly examples within our data which reinforce generational stereotypes, there were others which confound suggestions that younger people *are* feckless and wasteful, while their predecessors were paragons of virtue in the kitchen. Here, we focus on two families which highlight why linear historical narratives about the decline of cooking are simplistic and fail to account for the complexity of individual circumstances which are often time and context specific.

Within these two families we present a range of similarities *and* contrasts. There are women of a now dead generation who are perceived by their children as falling short of the domestic ideal in some respects, but not in others. Among their children, there is the retention of some of their values and concerns, while others are consciously eschewed, and knowing *how* to cook can – at different moments in time - also facilitate a choice *not* to cook. We have an example of a mother equipping her teenage daughter for independence, but also a father learning *with* and *from* his grown-up son. And in both families, there are women and men whose interest in cooking has been inspired by the experiences of travel or exposure to other

cultures, and – more closely to home – by now ubiquitous cookery programmes and an abundance of cookbooks . Finally, there is the acknowledgement that how parents want to cook and feed their children is not always consistent with what children are prepared to eat, therefore requiring a lower level of skill than they would ideally like to deploy.

Case studies

The ‘Anderson’ Family

The ‘Anderson’ family consists of retired professionals, Laura (63) and Ted (65) who have been married for 43 years. Both Laura and Ted agreed to take part in the study. They have two children, one of which (Jonathan, 38), also volunteered to take part, along with his partner (Polly, 36). The younger couple have a three-year old son, and Polly fell pregnant with their second child during their participation in the study. In their interviews, participants are being asked to reflect upon their earliest memories of food, provisioning, cooking and the distribution of roles and responsibilities in the kitchen. Both Laura and Ted discussed their mothers, who had primary responsibility for feeding the family. It is their reflections upon their (now dead) mothers’ practices, and the extent to which these have been embraced, or rejected, via their own practices, that we focus on here.

Ted is the eldest of five children, born into a mining family. His mother was married at 18 and had sole responsibility for raising her young family since her husband, Ted’s father, “*wasn’t around really*”. Confounding ideas that women of a particular generation were “*saints in the kitchen*”, Ted does not shy away from highlighting what he believes to be his mother’s limitations. He says: “*I think, I think we, er, later, most of my brothers and I thought that we were lucky to get by with the way my mother cooked, it was very sloppy*”. Although he suggests that “*exposure to this kind of slightly sloppy environmental control is probably a good thing*”, arguing that the contemporary preoccupation with reproducing “*hermetically sealed environments*” reduces our immunity to everyday microbial threats, Ted also acknowledges that his mother’s practices left much to be desired. For example, he reports how hygiene and ideas about cross-contamination were apparently beyond the scope of his mother’s practice:

“Well, she wasn’t, wasn’t clean in the kitchen, she used to, used to wipe the surface of the, of the, the worktop with this cloth she used to be wiping the floor with... er, or you’d have bleach in your food or something or, erm, you’d, I think there was no real hygiene”.

He also explains how she would drop food on the floor and then “*stick it straight back in the pan*”, sometimes giving the potatoes a “*slightly bleachy flavoured quality*”. While Ted is not averse to putting ‘fallen’ food back in his own pan, he will “*give it a scrub*” first. For him, it is important to retain a sense of pragmatism and practicality about perceived environmental threats and he argues that we can’t be expected to “*live up to the standards of the modern world*”.

In Ted’s opinion, his mother’s principal limitation appears to be that she simply didn’t know how to cook, and lacked the knowledge and skill he now values in knowing how to combine ingredients to produce something really tasty. Here, Ted reflects on what he views as the limits of his mother’s practice:

AM: *Was your mum a good cook?*

TA: *No.*

AM: *[laughs] Tell me about your mum’s cooking then.*

TA: *Well, she didn’t know how to cook and she had, my grandmother was a very good cook.*

AM: *So how come your mum didn’t learn from her?*

TA: *I don’t know, she’s much more casual I think. I think she could, but she wasn’t a very conscientious or careful cook, and she wasn’t very adventurous.*

AM: *Conscientious and careful about what?*

TA: *Erm, about erm, the kind of way she cooked things like, for example, she always overcooked vegetables, as everyone did in those days really, but (.) always did erm, she didn’t have any er, any real feeling for many foods... I think she never, never had good vegetables, and indeed no-one did in those days, they were no worse than the ones from school, school meals. She wasn’t a great cook but she, she was quite enthusiastic.*

In this excerpt, Ted’s narrative contests dominant discourses of how knowledge about how to cook passes through intergenerational transmission: the skills his grandmother possessed are not – in his view – passed down to her daughter, while his skills now appear to owe little to his mother. Importantly for Ted, his mother’s perceived lack of skill is offset by her enthusiasm.

Now, we move on to Laura, and her family of birth. An only child born to less affluent middle-class parents in the south of England, she describes living with her maternal grandfather until his death when she was nine. Although Ted and Laura are similar ages, Laura’s mother did not marry until she was 29, meaning that she was an ‘older’ housewife

than was Ted's mother. Apparently in common with other women of this older generation, "*the repertoire of food and meals that we had at home was very narrow*", and Laura recalls how it wasn't until she was on a foreign exchange holiday in her late teens that she discovered that fried eggs could be anything other than "*dead brown and crispy*". While Ted's mother is described as being a poor but enthusiastic housekeeper, this is contrasted by Laura's mum, who might also be seen as falling short of the ideal of the 1950s housewife but in very different ways. She says:

"Mum didn't like cooking, she didn't like housework. Just like, it was all a duty and she... No, she never really enjoyed it. Erm, she did it dutifully, erm. She wasn't sort of horrible about it but, you know, it, it (.) didn't feel like she was, I just, but you just knew that, um, that's not what she thought was the most important thing".

Although Laura presents an image of her mum as being a somewhat begrudging housewife who would have preferred to have spent her time gardening or painting, she is nonetheless scrupulous in the execution of her domestic responsibilities, and Laura recalls the rituals and routines which surrounded, for example, the sterilisation of milk jugs with boiling water. And, unlike Ted's mother, Laura's mum is reported as being extremely particular about the use of cloths for different surfaces, thereby minimising the potential for cross-contamination:

"...there's this thing which my auntie did as well, like having these cloths, these erm, like plastic coated wires strung along the bottom of the cupboards up in the kitchen and then there would always be these cloths hanging up in the kitchen that they would use for wiping surfaces and it was always really important that, you know, you use a separate cloth for a specific thing, you had to keep, I can't remember the order of it but, you know, certainly food, erm, floor cloths and food, surfaces were kind of separate".

Additionally, and in spite of her recollection that there was not "*a massive thing about food hygiene... there was always a bottle of Dettol in the cupboard*".

Patterns of continuity and change

One of the principal concerns of the study is to explore patterns of continuity and change within families, and here, the Andersons provide some useful insights. Although somewhat critical of his mother's "*casual*" approach to cooking and food hygiene, Ted *does* inherit some of his mother's pragmatism regarding microbial threats. Perhaps the most important continuity between Ted and his mother is their approach to feeding. Of this, he warmly says:

“Yeah, well it’s nice to feed people I think it’s, erm it’s, I mean my mother would say... she (.) was a bit more casual about it bit, bit more erm, global in her intentions and less, maybe less effective than she might be in her execution but she, her intention was to give people a good feed and that’s, I think that’s a great goal in life... really and it’s erm, there’s nothing better you can do for people than give them a nice meal... a decent meal every day. It’s a great pleasure yes, yes”.

For Laura, one of the similarities between she and her mum is the fairly “*basic*” cooking which characterised the years in which her children were young. This is commented on by Laura’s son, Jonathan, who says that her ‘meat and two veg approach’ to meals perhaps reflected the fact that “*she was probably at the outer reaches of her capabilities*”. Laura, herself, would not deny this, deferring to her husband when it comes to the preparation of the evening meal which, for her, *has* to be a cooked dinner. That said, the household is not characterised by a complete reversal of the traditional gendered division of labour. Indeed, maintaining her own mum’s concern with hygiene, she says that her role within the kitchen reflects her concern that it is “*kept tidy*”. But the preoccupation with cleaning does not end at mere tidiness. Making a distinction between ‘anxiety’ and ‘disgust’, which she recognises as being conceptually different, Laura explains her discomfort both with knowing that their cat might have been up on the dining table gnawing at leftovers, and with her doubts about the effectiveness of wiping the table down with a cloth which has not been hung out to dry in the manner that her mum and aunt would have insisted upon:

“I don’t really have a lot of anxieties about germs but I’m sure I do have boundaries and things that I’m a bit (.) ... ‘cause [cat] sits on [dining table], and it does go through my mind that, and I always try and dry off the cloth, ‘cause I, you know it’s like rescuing this slimy cloth from the bottom of the washing up bowl and wiping the table, and I’m thinking ‘I don’t know if I’m achieving much here really’, erm. It’s more about, kind of disgust really, rather than anyone actually gonna get ill, it’s like not nice really. It doesn’t feel like clean and nice”.

Where both mothers, and Laura, are reported by their children as lacking skill and imagination in the kitchen, Ted, and his son Jonathan, rupture ideas that cooking knowledge is something which is passed on either via processes of inter-generational transmission, or through the female line. Unlike women of various ages who attest to learning how to cook by ‘osmosis’ (DeVault, 1991), this did not occur for these men. Jonathan and Ted developed an interest in cooking together while Laura was working away and the family had taken in Chinese lodgers. Intrigued by the “*simple way of cooking*” used by their houseguests, Ted

and his teenage son attempted to replicate this approach while fending for themselves. At different stages, both went on to supplement their knowledge by reading Mediterranean cookbooks, in Ted's case, while Jonathan picked up ideas from European friends while working at Eurocamp, initially, and later by watching *Ready Steady Cook*. Years of reading, observing others and experimentation, has resulted in a knowledge and feel for food, and an understanding of how ingredients work together, enabling both men to enthusiastically produce a wider range of meals – that will both satisfy and inspire - than they believe their mothers had in the past. Figure 1 illustrates Ted consulting one of his Mediterranean cookbooks, while Figure 2 shows Jonathan deploying his skills and expertise in the kitchen. Ted's delight in being able to combine a selection of fresh and processed ingredients with the right seasoning and other bits from the cupboard is clear in the comment below. For him, the issue is not one of whether one *can* cook, but an ability to understand the principles of taste:

“There is something... very, er, rewarding about starting up... with some rather ancient vegetables stuck at the bottom of the fridge ... just a few old bits and pieces from the bottom of the fridge and that's, that's an amazing thing to do and er, people say they've nothing to eat and oh, this is stupid (.) and a few well-chosen tins if necessary, but you can just er, you can always produce something very, very nice if you know, the principles of taste I think (.) how to produce something from er, ingredients, how the ingredients go together”.

Our work with the Anderson men, in particular, clearly contests the currency of narratives of erosion, and Ted and Jonathan highlight that cooking and provisioning are more than merely constituent elements in the job of 'feeding the family'. Indeed, they demonstrate a shift toward cooking being an expressive *lifestyle practice* (Hollows and Jones 2010), albeit one that men who live with women can engage with their own terms (Swinbank 2002)³.

Insert images here

Figure 1: Ted Anderson searching tapas recipes

Figure 2: Jonathan Anderson preparing stir-fried chicken

The Anderson family case study makes visible a number of key insights into the complexities of how cooking skills are inherited, acquired, subverted and lost. Whilst Ted understands

³ For a discussion of gendered engagement with food/cooking emerging from the study, along with the impact of men's presence in the kitchen, see Meah and Jackson (under review).

himself to have inherited his mother's fundamental ethic of wanting to give people a decent feed, he can identify little positive he learnt from her in terms of the skills to deliver on that ethic to an adequate standard. His kitchen skills developed later in life, through self-motivated exploration, learning and experimentation, in response to changing family circumstances. Laura has apparently reinterpreted what she learnt about cleanliness and hygiene to the shifting realities of knowledge, situation and the household division of labour. Turning next to the Faulkner family, we find additional insights.

The Faulkner family

Participating members of the Faulkner family consist of retired Kate (63) and her eldest daughter, Hannah (35). Hannah has two daughters under the age of five and also works part-time for a community development organisation. Also contributing to the study is Louisa (19), Hannah's step-daughter from her husband's first marriage, and Hannah's paternal grandmother, Augusta (92). As with the Andersons, the Faulknors are overtly middle-class. Kate's husband, Frank (65) is the director of an engineering company and, until her retirement, Kate had been a secretary within the company. The family had spent seven years living in the Far East before settling in South Yorkshire in the late 1980s. Unlike Ted Anderson, Kate acknowledges that her own social background was probably middle-class, her father being a police inspector, her mother a nurse, both parents having passed away in the last few years.

While Ted Anderson's mother worked hard to make the little money she had to feed a large family go far, delighting in giving them a "good feed", Kate Faulkner paints quite a different picture of her childhood. Although she admits that her mother's nursing background meant that "everything was scrubbed and cleaned... she was quite into hygiene, disinfecting things", this was, according to Kate, the limit of her 'saintliness' in the kitchen. Indeed, confounding stereotypes which purport family feeding to be an important marker of mothers' caring roles (see DeVault 1991), from the outset, Kate reports that her mother "didn't want to cook, she hated cooking, she hated anything to do with food, she didn't really like food or eating".

Where Laura Anderson's mother is depicted as undertaking her domestic activities begrudgingly, Kate does not hold back in suggesting that her mother was *neglectful*, and she complains that hunger was something which characterised her and her brother's childhoods. Perhaps to compensate for the dearth of nutritious food provided by his wife, Kate says that her father would set them up for the day with a cooked breakfast. This proved important

because school meals were also “*appalling*” and there would be little to look forward to when they came home for tea:

“...I used to have a cooked breakfast and then I went to a convent school in (name) but the food was appalling, like gristle stew you know, a tiny portion. So I was so thin and under-nourished, I think, and erm, and then I’d come home and there’d be no food, no meal... There wasn’t an evening meal, that just didn’t happen, so for an evening meal we’d have perhaps an egg or something... So, I mean I was always ill”.

While Kate describes “*sugar butties*” and the absence of meals with any nutritional value (and not being able to explain what happened to the fruit and vegetables her father grew), she also reports that, when old enough, she had to step into the void wrought by her mother’s disdain for cooking. She recalls spending hours peeling potatoes and Sunday mornings as the “*time to make all the food for the week*”, including baking, since “*there wasn’t a lot of money*”. While admitting that she felt resentful of her supporting role in the kitchen at the time, she acknowledges that “*I ended up a really good cook ‘cause of that*”.

Kate could not really remember how it was that she learnt to become a good cook, but she is clear that her skills were not acquired from her mother whom, she suggests, was not only a “*dreadful cook*”, but lazy also: “*anything for convenience, my mother was a great one for anything for convenience [laughs] ...and tins and packets, there was all the tins and packets... she didn’t believe in cooking things from scratch*”. Moreover, Kate also suggests that she was an arrogant cook who refused to engage with cookbooks or learn how to make certain dishes, curry being an example. Figure 3 illustrates Kate’s departure from her mother’s dismissal of other sources of knowledge. Of her mother, Kate explains:

“Yeah, but she would never read recipe books, she would never find out how to do anything... she’d just think she knew everything and she’s, ‘oh that’s how you make curry’, I suppose, doesn’t care anyway”.

Insert image

Figure 3: Kate Faulkner’s collection of cookbooks

In Kate’s opinion, her mother’s shortcomings are not just as a cook. She reports that, even at a very early age, she recognised that “*there must be a better way of, of living, and a better way of bringing up children, than the way my mother did it*”. Kate learned more about what

this ‘better way’ might look like while training, and then practicing, as a nursery nurse, during which time she also learnt more about cooking. And, like Ted and Jonathan Anderson, she also learnt from someone outside of the family sharing the family home and cooking space. For Kate, this was the *amma*⁴ who lived with them while the family was based in the Far East. By the time her own children came along, she was well prepared to implement the sort of parenting in their childhoods which she had longed for in her own. However, when her own young daughters turned out to be fussy eaters, refusing to eat her lovingly prepared, nutritious, home-cooked meals, Kate was distraught, feeling that she was failing as a mother:

“I went through a phase where I just had to give them rubbish food because it was driving me mad. I was getting into such a state about it... feeling so guilty and so (.) bad that they wouldn’t eat, they weren’t getting proper nutrition and, and one day I just thought, ‘oh I can’t do this any longer I’ll just give them what they want’ [laughs]”.

Her daughter, Hannah, does not recall any of the anxieties that her and sister’s eating behaviours caused Kate when they were growing up. She does, however, vividly recall her mum imparting the life-skills that would be necessary to survive when living away from home.

HF: ...when I was a teenager my mum said that I needed to learn how to cook things because I’d be living away from home.

AM: ...Hmm, so what, what was the process with your mum then?

HF: ...Well, I think that (.) she would always tell me what she was doing and explain how to cook things but then I think before I left home, maybe like the summer before I went to university, she properly said ‘Right, you need to have, we need to buy you a knife and you need to have these things and, need to tell you need to, you need to work out what you want to cook and how you’re gonna cook it’ ...I remember her saying ‘Right well you need to learn how to cook and you need to learn how to (.) do these sort of things and understand about you know, how you defrost food and making sure that if you defrost it you don’t freeze it again’ and certain, and, and all those sorts of things in quite a structured way, so that when I went off to university, also I think she wrote out some recipes of things ...and all the instructions.

Cooking skills in life-course context

Hannah’s own ‘kitchen story’ is interesting in what it reveals about the impact of life-course events and transitions, and exposure to different experiences, on individual practices. So, while she acknowledges having gone to university with a knowledge of healthy cooking and eating which she adhered to for the first two years, living with other people exposed her to

⁴ Meaning ‘mother’ in East Asian countries.

new things, such as the fact that you could have “*crisps for breakfast*”, a concept which had previously been alien to her. However, this was but one phase in her life, and when she returned to South Yorkshire on completion of her studies, she says that she “*really got into cooking*”. This was facilitated – initially – by sharing the house she bought with like-minded friends, and then in a relationship with a boyfriend who was very interested in food and cooking. However, with husband, Ian (42), this interest was not shared, and her efforts at avoiding processed foods and preparing meals from ‘scratch’ are rarely acknowledged:

“...I would spend a lot of time cooking but what I found was that Ian didn’t really appreciate the time that I would spend cooking ...I would take an extra hour ...to make a pasta sauce by blending chopped tomato and all that stuff as opposed to opening a jar of pasta sauce ...So I think, even though he did appreciate, you know, having proper food, the level of preparation that I went into ...got less because he’s not () that value of how long it’s taken”.

Since becoming a mother, decisions about how much time and effort to put into her cooking have largely been taken out of Hannah’s hands. At the time of interview, Hannah’s daughters were 14 months and 4 years old. She reported that she no longer had the time to enjoy leisurely preparing meals made with fresh ingredients, since babies “*dominate your whole world*”, particularly during the breastfeeding period when “*you can’t put them down*”. Off the menu are foods which require standing over, and the rice maker, inherited from her mother, has become an important innovation in her kitchen armoury, as has the microwave pan which can be used one-handed while carrying a small child on her hip. Hannah pointed out that: “*I’ve had to make loads and loads of compromises over food*”. These include “*breaded fish and rice and frozen peas because that’s, that’s a real standard thing, and it’s also to do with what a three year old will eat*”. Hannah went on to explain her routine at that time:

“...I know I’ve got it the wrong way round, but when I’ve got a baby and a small child, erm, I can turn the oven on, I can put the rice cooker on, I can put the peas in the microwave and then all I need to do is put the fish in the oven and put the timer on... I couldn’t have anything on the pa... on the side... bubbling ...and when I’m wanting to get Daisy’s food on the table quicker, because she’s hungry, I have you know, rainbow veg, cut up bits of vegetables, so for me those are compromises because I would never have eaten frozen vegetables”.

Here, we see that rather than deskilling Hannah or being reflective of ‘laziness’ on her part, innovations such as the rice-maker and automatic oven, along with the availability of frozen

foods, offer time-pressed mothers important resources in the business of feeding young children who require constant care and observation.

Eight months after the interview, the first author spent an afternoon with Hannah, during which she observed her making lunch, writing her shopping list, accompanied her shopping with Beatrice, now 22 months, and collecting Daisy from school before returning home to prepare the evening meal. Hannah felt that it was important to draw attention to the fact that her circumstances have changed since she was interviewed and the impact that this has had on her cooking routines and practices. Not only is Daisy now at school, but Beatrice is no longer just “*tottering around,*” meaning “*she’s much easier now*”.

Hannah’s compromises around food and its preparation do not indicate that she has become deskilled in cooking, is eschewing the values instilled in her by her own mother, or that she is becoming like her grandmother. Extended engagement with the household highlights the complexity of the challenges faced by people – women in particular – balancing work and family life. In her view, Hannah has become neither deskilled nor lost interest; her priorities have simply shifted to accommodate the needs of her young children. Indeed, her continuing interest in, and commitment to, cooking in the way she had before having children, along with her desire to nurture this interest in her daughters, is reflected in Figure 4, where we see Hannah supervising her daughters creating their own pizza toppings to put onto pre-bought and rolled pizza dough, an activity which - Hannah reports – is something the children really enjoy.

Insert image

Figure 4: Daisy, Hannah and Beatrice Faulkner making pizzas

Conclusion

Concerns about the relative lack of cooking skills are nothing new. Whether these focus on a decline in culinary competence from one generation to the next, or upon the lack of ability of members of one social class compared to another, social anxieties around food provisioning have been persistent over recent centuries. As Lang, Baring and Caraher (2009) discuss, from the emergence of the waged economy to the arrival of pre-chopped vegetables and ‘assembly’ cuisine, concerns about skills, confidence and the distribution of responsibilities

for feeding the family have been a perennial focus of public health, social policy and popular discourse. Contemporary manifestations of these discourses revolve around familiar general issues, whether the deskilling of food preparation through the rise of convenience foods, or historically continuous concerns about the culinary limitations of (now loosely defined) lower social classes. By focusing critical attention on discourses of inter-generational decline in cooking skills through fine-grained qualitative research with specific households, in this article we have problematised the assumptions underlying this discourse.

To the extent that the lack of particular food skills is a problem - whether for public health, particular ideals of family togetherness, personal wellbeing, or the support of some desired form of food supply and retail – the dynamics and causes of such deficiency cannot be tied down to any specific processes, or easily aligned with any linear historical narrative of decline. The findings presented above begin to expose the diversity of sources through which culinary competence is constituted. They indicate, too, the specificity of appropriate levels of skills and competence in the changing landscape of household food provision as the systems of food provision and the spatial and technological configuration of kitchens and of eating, responsibility and competence are inevitably redistributed.

That the issues raised by the Anderson and Faulkner families are not simply isolated examples of older women who challenge the stereotypes of good old-fashioned cooks is reflected, here, by chef and food writer, Nigel Slater, whose understanding “*of the principles of taste*”, like Ted and Kate’s, apparently emerges in spite of, not because of his mother’s limited culinary competence:

Mum was never much of a cook. Meals arrived on the table as much by happy accident as by domestic science. She was a chops-and-peas sort of cook, occasionally going so far as to make a rice pudding, exasperated by the highs and lows of a temperamental cream-and-black Aga and a finicky little son. She found it all a bit of an ordeal, and wished she could have left the cooking, like the washing, ironing and dusting, to Mrs P., 'her woman that does' (Slater 2003: 1-2).

Preliminary analyses of data from this on-going study indicate that it is both simplistic and inappropriate to make assumptions about the knowledge and domestic practices of people of a particular generation, assuming one to be paragons of virtue while another is ‘demonised’ for its ignorance or laziness. Indeed, what we have learned from the data thus far points toward the profound complexity of the ways in which individuals’ practices are socially and

culturally embedded, and emergent from a range of factors which include exposure to external influences, time and space, and a range of life-course transitions which might temporarily, or permanently, rupture existing patterns and behaviours. Amidst the many ways in which our participants have developed their own levels of competence as domestic cooks, learning from parents is not necessarily a substantial identifiable source of cooking skills. While understanding and abilities learnt as children at home undoubtedly can provide a firm foundation for future competence as an adult, it seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for people to competently accomplish the provision of food for themselves and others in a foodscape which has continuously changed in fundamental ways over recent generations. Cooking skills are learnt, appropriated and reassessed, from multiple sources and according to shifting life circumstances, from major events of partnering, separating or parenthood, through a new TV cooking programme capturing someone somehow ready to engage anew with the challenges and pleasures of cooking. It is the aim of this study to facilitate an understanding of peoples' practices which accounts for the subtleties of their interactions with objects, knowledge, discourses and others as they move between different environments.

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